

The Prince of Darkness

By Anthony Hope

UNDER cover of night, the Duke and Frank left King's Cross the same evening. The chef had preceded them with the luggage; he made no stipulation about kitchen or scullery-maids—everybody was always anxious to oblige his Grace. A journey of some forty miles brought them to their destination. On the outskirts of the little town they alighted. They were twelve in number, each comprising half an acre of land. Three cottages stood facing the allotments, with their backs to the highroad. One of these now appertained to the Duke.

He began to dig at 9.30 a.m. His allotment had been good deal neglected, and the ground happened to be hard. Presently he found himself afflicted with acute enations in the back. He began to wonder what men in allotments did when they felt tired. A thought struck him—a reminiscence of his wide and curious reading. Observing a small girl seated on the railing which bordered the allotment, he approached her. "Child," said he, kindly, "be good enough to go to the nearest public-house and fetch me a pint of four-alf."

"Where's your money?" said the child. The Duke had been too realistic; there was no money in his pocket. He returned to his labors (he had promised himself to be independent of Frank for at least three hours) with a sigh; the little girl laughed scornfully, and then performed a somersault. The Duke was not quite pleased.

By twelve o'clock his back was very bad and his hands blistered; his corduroy trousers were cutting him at the back of the knees. Also it had begun to rain. "I have the sensation vividly enough for the moment," he said to himself, throwing down his spade. He had turned up a considerable amount of earth, and had found some vegetables amongst it; he was not very clear what they were. He picked up his coat, put it on, and began, instinctively, to feel for a cigarette. No case was to be found.

"Oh, confound that Frank!" said the Duke, mechanically. "Need you swear?" asked a voice, suddenly. "Who wouldn't?" mumbled the Duke, who was just wiping his brow (which was like that of the blacksmith in the poem) with a large and painfully rough pocket-handkerchief.

"What?" "The voice was very sharp. It recalled to the Duke the necessities of his situation. Emerging from behind the handkerchief, he found himself in the presence of a tall, stout lady of imperious demeanor. She wore a skirt, consequently ample, of shiny black, and a black velvet mantle embellished with beads, apparently jet. The Duke's instinct rarely failed him; that was what would have made him such a great man of affairs. "The person's wife," he thought to himself without a moment's hesitation. Then he cast about for his wisest course of action.

"Why aren't you at work?" the lady demanded, sternly. "I do be of a-workin'," said the Duke. "Leastways I be of a just 'avin' done it." He clung to his "be" with no small confidence. "Where do you come from?" "Zummerzett," said he. "You talk in a funny way. When did you come here?"

The Duke felt sure that he ought not to say "Last night." Accordingly he replied, "Yuster-een."

The lady looked suspicious. "You're seeking employment?" "Suddenly—and opportunely—the Duke remembered Frank's warning; he was to be out of work! "Yus, I be," he said, wondering if his face was dirty enough. "Church or chapel?" she asked, sharply. "Church," answered the Duke. And, by a happy thought, he added, "marm."

"What's your name?" With the question she produced a little note-book and a pencil. "Devv—" he began, thoughtlessly. He stopped. A barren invention, and a mind acute to the danger of hesitation, combined to land him in "Devyile."

"Devyil? That's a very odd name." "My feyther's name afore me," affirmed the Duke, who felt that he was playing his part rather well, though he regretted that a different initial consonant had not occurred to him.

The lady surveyed him with a long and distrustful glance. "Have you had any beer this morning?" she asked. The Duke had not taken beer for years—not even in the morning. "Naw," he replied, with a touch of indignation.

"I wish I was sure of that!" she remarked. The Duke, himself regretfully sure (for, as has been seen, the digging had changed his feelings towards beer), wondered at her suspicious disposition. "Well, we shall see. You're in my daughter's district. She will come and see you."

"Verry good, marm," said the Duke. "Are you married?" "No, marm." "You live alone, then?" "I got a brother, marm, but he do be kind o'—kind o' weak."

"A pair of you, I think!" she remarked rather disconcertingly, as she turned and marched off. The Duke returned to his cottage and decided, over a pint of hock and a bottle of seltzer, that he had come out of the interview with much credit.

listened to in his life softly pronounce the question—"Oh, please, are you the man Devv?" "I really ought to have recollected to tell Frank about that little mistake of mine," thought the Duke, smiling. His smile, however, vanished as he heard Frank, in answer to the question, shout, with extraordinary vigor, "Yahoo, yahoo, yahoo!"

"This will never do," said the Duke, rising and laying down his napkin. The fellow always overacts. I said idiosyncrasy—not mania." "I must see this girl," said the Duke. "I think I'd better call again to-morrow," said Miss Angela. "I'm in a hurry now—it's Mothers' Meeting night. I'll come in to-morrow. Will you give this to your brother? Mama sent it. Can you understand me, poor fellow?"

"Yahoo, yahoo," murmured Frank. The door closed. The Duke dashed to the window. "Upon my word!" said the Duke. "Yes, upon my word!" he repeated, twirling his mustache as he returned to the table.

Frank entered, holding a silver salver. "With Miss Angela Hordern's compliments, your Grace." "Thank you, Frank. You can serve the entrée." "Very good, your Grace." Frank withdrew, and the Duke examined the paper which he had taken from the salver. It acquired a certain interest from having passed through Miss Angela's

Frank remained to be dealt with. The Duke summoned him and addressed him with a serious air. "You are attached to me, Frank?" "Yes, your Grace." "I wish to be alone to-day. Have the goodness to occupy Mrs. Hordern's attention."

"I don't rightly know how to do it, your Grace." "What day of the week is it?" "Sunday, your Grace." "A fortunate circumstance!—One doesn't dig on Sundays?"

"No, your Grace." "The rain may stop, for all I care," said the Duke. "Go and occupy Mrs. Hordern, Frank, and get taken to church. Mitigate your mental inferiority to a reasonable extent; and say that the man with the fever has been removed."

"How, your Grace?" asked Frank. "Don't trouble me with details. Do as I tell you." "Very good, your Grace." "And let Miss Hordern arrive here at seven o'clock." "Yes, your Grace." "That will do, Frank. I shall not go out to-day. Leave the corduroys on the bed."

"Thank you, your Grace." "And, Frank, in case I change my mind, let there be a motor-car here, and a table at the Savoy this evening—rather late."

"I'll attend to it at once, your Grace."

seigneur Alphonse. "It can't be that Alphonse will fail me!" thought the Duke uneasily. The shrimps, although not absolutely essential, constituted an artistic detail particularly congruous with his taste.

Precisely at seven o'clock he saw Miss Hordern approaching. With enormous pleasure he noted the graceful outline of her figure as she crossed the allotment; with less gratification he observed that she was accompanied by what is termed a "growing lad" of about fourteen. "These precautions aren't very complimentary," thought the Duke.

Her knock sounded on the door. The Duke fell into a doze. She knocked again. "I do hope he's not—not queer—again to-day," said Angela. "The door's open. Let's go in and look. I'm not afraid."

He heard them enter the house; he rose and opened the sitting-room door. "Oh, there you are! Good evening. May we come in?" Miss Hordern had come and let me go to church—only she's got such a bad headache that she's been obliged to go to bed."

The Duke made no immediate reply. Angela came in, followed by the boy. The boy put down on the table a round parcel which he was carrying. "Jelly!" thought the Duke. Angela laid down a volume. "Lessons!" the Duke murmured.

"Oh, but you haven't had your tea yet," cried Angela. "I'm afraid we are interrupting you." "It's laid for two," remarked the boy. "Himself and his poor brother, Tommy."

"I do be proud—" began the Duke. But suddenly the door from the kitchen opened and Monsieur Alphonse appeared. He carried a large plate loaded with shrimps.

"Ze shrimp!" he cried, triumphantly waving a napkin which he held in his other hand. "Criskey! who's this?" cried Tommy. "Well, he might. Monsieur Alphonse wore a tight-fitting frock-coat, a water-tight tie of huge dimensions, pearl-gray trousers, white spats and patent leather boots, a red rose in one lapel of the coat, and in the other a blue ribbon of the Order of St. Honoratus of Pomerania, bestowed on him by His Serene Highness the reigning Duke, on the occasion of the latter's Coronation Banquet."

The Duke was plainly vexed. "Monsieur Alphonse," he said, "I didn't ring." Naturally he forgot the absence of a bell. "Mais, Monsieur le—"

The Duke arrested his words with a gesture, and turned to Angela. "Further concealment, madam, is, I fear, useless. I am not what I seem. May I rely on your honor?" Angela fixed her charming blue eyes on the Duke.

"But who are you? And what does it all mean?" she asked. There is no telling what explanation the Duke intended to proffer, for at this instant Tommy cried, with every appearance of agitation, "Angela, Willie Anderson was right! It's them!"

"Them?" cried Angela, affrightedly, and sank into a chair. "Who's Willie Anderson, my boy?" asked the Duke, kindly. "He's the Chief Constable—and you'll soon find it out! If you did take the silver plate, you needn't have knocked old Lady Culverstone down with the poker, you know?"

"I knocked old Lady Culverstone—if she is old—down with the—oh, preposterous!" exclaimed the Duke. He turned to Angela. "You don't believe that of me?" he asked in a tender voice. "It was supposed they were the disguise of working men," she murmured. "Willie did tell me that."

"Willie?" "I am engaged to Captain Anderson, the Chief Constable," Angela confessed, with a pretty blush. "There you are!" said the Duke, fairly exasperated by this additional vexation. "That's what always happens to me!"

Before he could say more, Frank rushed in from the kitchen. "The cottage is surrounded with police and laborers," he cried. "They'll be in at the door in a moment!" The Duke never hesitated. As Captain Anderson dashed in at one door, he dashed out at the other, followed by Frank and Monsieur Alphonse. He could, of course, have declared himself; but such an action would have severely wounded his amour propre; he peided himself on carrying out his experiments unostentatiously, and hated getting his name into the papers.

"Make for the inn!" he whispered to his companions, as they emerged from the back door of the cottage, darted across its tiny yard, and gained the main road. After them, his lads, rang out Captain Anderson's military tones, and the whole pack was at their heels, Tommy gleefully shouting "Tally-ho!"

by policemen and so forth while I'm so engaged. Do I do any harm to anybody? It's preposterous!" "I suppose you're mad, really," she said, thoughtfully. "Then let's be mad together for just a little while," he suggested. "Come, now, you're finding this quite enjoyable?"

"What will Willie be feeling—and thinking?" She gave a slight laugh. "Oh, I'm so glad mama's gone to bed!" she added the next instant. "She is beginning to enjoy herself," the Duke decided.

"You will take me back?" "You shall be at the vicarage not later than half-past ten." "Oh, but that's very late." "Earlier if you wish—but in no case later. After all, Mrs. Hordern has gone to bed—and Captain Anderson is probably very busy."

Angela looked at him; her eyes twinkled a little—or maybe that was only an impression of the Duke's. "I've always heard that it's dangerous to thwart mad people," she said.

The Duke had been heard to remark that this young lady, whom he entertained that night in a manner which may be termed purely fortuitous, was one of the most agreeable companions whom it had ever been his fortune to meet. There can be little doubt that Miss Angela Hordern, in her turn, felt the attraction which the Duke's good breeding and intellectual alertness seldom failed to arouse.

"I should love a motor!" sighed Miss Angela. "You're going to have one," said the Duke. "But we must have something to eat first." "You talk as if you were a prince in disguise," she laughed.

The Duke laughed, too, reflecting that, as a matter of strict formality, he was entitled to the style she mentioned. In view of this fact he did not feel called upon expressly to deny her suggestion. There can be little doubt that his silence, to which, perhaps, she attributed too much significance, enhanced the pleasure of her ride. "I'm to know you, then, only by that very funny name?"

In an examination of her profile—for which the light still sufficed—the Duke had grown abstracted. "What name?" he murmured, vaguely. "The one you told mama—Devil! That's not really your name?"

"Not exactly!" concurred the Duke. "I should think not," laughed the lady. Herself somewhat addicted to colloquial expressions, she failed to understand with what accuracy the Duke had phrased his reply. "I shall think of you as the Prince of Darkness," said she, with the kindest glance.

"I doubt whether much of this is not wasted on a Chief Constable," thought the Duke.

Five minutes later they stopped before the Duke's small house in a lane adjoining the Heath. "Monsieur Alphonse, here is your opportunity. A nice little dinner in a quarter of an hour for Made-moiselle and myself!"

"It shall be so, Monsieur le—"

"Quick, quick!" interrupted the Duke. "Excuse me one moment. Frank, show Miss Hordern in, and see to her wants. I must have a word with Ferdinand." Angela Hordern entered the little house full of a pleasurable anticipation. All was ready for them; fresh flowers bloomed everywhere; the Observer and the Referee lay on the table. She turned to Frank in a sudden surprise.

"He meant to come here all the time?" "No, madam. But this is always kept ready by his Gr—by my master's orders."

"I am given to understand that the revenue has decreased slightly of late," was Frank's answer, given with an admirable carelessness. "This is all settled," said the Duke, entering the room with a cheerful air. "I'm right, Frank, in supposing that Sir Gerald Standish is still in the Bahamas?"

"Yes, your—"

hands. The Duke fingered it delicately and eyed it pensively. It was entitled "A Dram for a Drinker—or, Just a Drop to do You Good."

He rose early the next morning—and observed the weather anxiously. It rained heavily. "Good!" he said, feeling his back. "One can't dig in the wet. I shall have time to arrange affairs."

He had, in fact, tasks of no small delicacy to achieve. The first was with Monsieur Alphonse. The Duke courteously requested the chef's presence, Frank being the intermediary. Alphonse came.

"Monsieur," said the Duke, "I have to make a sad communication to you."

At one o'clock Frank returned by a circuitous route, and entered, from the road, through the back yard—which obviated the necessity of crossing the allotments. He served a cold luncheon.

"You've arranged matters, Frank?" "Yes, your Grace. The young lady will call at seven—with some jelly for your lady throat."

"I was rather afraid she might wish to go to church, Frank."

"Yes, your Grace; but as you are too ill to go, the Vicar thinks that it will do just as well if she comes and reads the lessons of the day to your Grace."

"That will do just as well?" "That was the Vicar's expression, your Grace."

"Ah, he spoke from a professional point of view, no doubt. The arrangement is quite satisfactory. How did you get on with Mrs. Hordern—and at church?"

"I did very well, your Grace, since your Grace is kind enough to inquire. With reference to last night, I explained that my attacks of mental affliction were intermittent, though frequently recurrent. But the doctor is to come to see me to-morrow—by Mrs. Hordern's orders, your Grace."

"Sufficient unto the day!" said the Duke, serenely. "You will remove that notice from the door as soon as our neighbors have started for evening church—or chapel."

At 6.30, a large motor-car broke down opposite the village inn. The chauffeur announced that the necessary repairs would take some time; he took some time himself—and some refreshment—before he set about them.

At 6.50, Frank, returning from a little stroll in the neighborhood of the inn, reported the arrival of Monsieur Ferdinand, his Grace's chief chauffeur, and removed the notice from the door of the cottage. He laid tea and withdrew. Everything was ready—except the shrimps. There was, as yet, no sign of the shrimps—nor of Mon-



THE DUKE BENT LOW AND LIGHTLY KISSED HER HAND.